

Maria Tallchief, Dancer



Above all, I wanted to be appreciated as a prima ballerina who happened to be a Native American, never as someone who was an American Indian ballerina.

1 Maria Tallchief was born in 1925 on an Osage Indian Reservation. From the beginning of her childhood, Maria loved both music and dance. She loved watching the Native American dances on the reservation and listening to the music that had been passed down from generation to generation. She was happy to learn about her Native American culture.

2 Her mother recognized Maria's interest in both music and dance. When Maria was just three years old, her mother started her in piano lessons and dance lessons. Maria and her sister, Marjorie, began dancing at rodeos and country fairs.

3 When Maria was eight years old, the family decided to move away from the reservation. Her parents wanted their children to have more opportunities in education and the arts, so the family moved to Los Angeles, California. Maria's father wanted her to concentrate on either music or dance. Maria chose dance and she focused on ballet.

4 In the 1940s, ballet was still new in the United States. Most dancers came from Russia. The director of Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo saw Maria dance. He knew how talented she was as a dancer. As soon as Maria graduated high school, he asked her to join his ballet company. This started her career as a professional ballet dancer. Many people told Maria that she should change her last name because it

reflected her Native American heritage. They were afraid that she would be discriminated against and she would not be hired as a dancer. But Maria refused. She was proud of her heritage and she wanted Native American girls to know that they could be ballet dancers too.

5 In 1949, Maria became the Prima Ballerina of the New York City Ballet. A prima ballerina is a lead dancer. Maria would hold this position until she retired in 1996.

6 After retiring from dancing, Maria moved to Chicago, Illinois. She continued to be involved in the world of dance. She was the director of the Chicago Lyric Opera Ballet for several years. Then she started the Chicago City Ballet in 1981. Her ballet company lasted until 1987.

7 Maria Tallchief was respected not only for her amazing talent as a dancer, but for her intelligence and honesty. In 1996 she received a *Kennedy Center Honor* and in 1999 she received a *National Medal of Arts*.

Name: _____

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1. How did Maria fight discrimination against Native Americans?

2. Why do you think Maria's dad made her choose between music and dance?

3. Summarize Maria Tallchief's life in 1 - 3 sentences.

4. How does paragraph 1 and paragraph 4 relate to each other?
